# THE SAME CAGE, DIFFERENT BARS

*How Ruling Elites Use Belief to Prevent the People They Rule from Recognizing Each Other*

*On the manufacture of horizontal alienation and the universality of elite interest*

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## I. Two Women

Picture two women. One lives in Tehran. She wears a hijab — not because police are watching, though sometimes they are, but because she was raised to understand that modesty is a virtue, that her covering is an expression of faith and dignity, that a good woman presents herself this way. She has internalized this. It is genuinely hers. She does not experience it as oppression.

The other lives in Dallas. She spends money and time she cannot easily afford on specific standards of appearance — particular body weight, particular clothing, particular performance of femininity — because she was raised to understand that these things signal respectability, that a good woman presents herself this way. She has internalized this too. It is genuinely hers. She does not experience it as oppression either.

Each, if she encounters the other, is likely to feel something between pity and contempt. The woman from Dallas looks at the hijab and sees submission — a woman controlled by a patriarchal religion, too conditioned to recognize her own unfreedom. The woman from Tehran looks at the Dallas woman's particular performance of Western femininity — the dieting, the cosmetic labor, the presentation calibrated to male approval — and sees a different kind of submission, dressed up as liberation.

Both observations are partially correct. Both women are performing standards of femininity that were defined primarily by men, transmitted through institutions those men controlled, enforced through social pressure and sometimes legal mechanisms, and experienced by the women inside them as freely chosen expressions of identity and virtue. The content differs. The mechanism is identical. The cage is the same cage. The bars just run in different directions.

What neither woman can easily see — what the systems they inhabit are specifically designed to prevent them from seeing — is that the person across the divide is not her opposite. She is her parallel. They are in structurally identical positions, produced by structurally identical processes, managed by elites who understand each other across the civilizational divide perfectly well, and who have a shared interest in ensuring that the women they govern do not come to the same recognition.

This paper is about that prevention — how it works, why it works, and what it costs the people it works on.

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## II. The Double Operation

The previous paper in this series established that people do not choose their belief systems. They absorb them — through childhood institutions, community expectations, legal structures, and the suppression of alternatives — and experience the result as personal conviction. The content of what you believe tracks, with remarkable consistency, the belief system of whoever controlled the institutional apparatus when you were young enough to be shaped by it. That apparatus was built by people who won wars.

This paper takes that argument one step further. The manufacture of belief does not simply produce conviction. It produces two specific effects simultaneously, and these two effects are not separate outcomes that happen to accompany each other. They are the same operation, performed by the same mechanism, in the service of the same interest.

The first effect is vertical identification. The belief system you absorb naturalizes the hierarchy you were born into. It explains why the people at the top are at the top — through divine will, through natural talent, through the working out of historical

destiny, through the just rewards of merit and effort. It positions the person at the bottom of a hierarchy not as someone being exploited but as someone participating in a legitimate order. The American worker who identifies with the billionaire class — who votes against his own economic interests because he experiences the billionaire's interests as his interests, because they are both Americans, because the billionaire represents the freedom and possibility that the American system promises — is not confused. He is successfully manufactured. He has absorbed the framework that makes upward identification feel like patriotism and downward solidarity feel like weakness or envy.

The second effect is horizontal alienation. The same belief system that naturalizes your own hierarchy marks the hierarchies of other civilizations as alien, threatening, and incomprehensible. It does this not through explicit instruction — you are rarely told directly that the Iranian worker is your enemy — but through the accumulated weight of symbols, rituals, narratives, and categories that define your identity against an outside. Your civilization is the normal one. Theirs is the strange one. Your hierarchy is legitimate. Theirs is oppressive. Your religion is truth. Theirs is superstition. Your gender norms are freedom. Theirs are control.

These two effects — upward identification with your own ruling class, horizontal alienation from the equivalent class elsewhere — are not independent. They are structurally linked. You cannot naturalize your own hierarchy without othering alternatives to it, because acknowledging that other hierarchies are equally legitimate would raise the question of why yours is worth accepting. And you cannot maintain horizontal solidarity across civilizational lines without beginning to see that the ruling arrangements on both sides operate through the same mechanisms, which is the beginning of seeing that neither arrangement is natural or inevitable.

> *The belief system that makes your own hierarchy feel like the order of things necessarily makes other hierarchies feel like aberrations. This is not a bug. It is the primary function.*

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## III. What the Elite Sees

In January, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the leaders of governments, the heads of major corporations, the managing directors of sovereign wealth funds, and the prominent figures of international finance gather to discuss the state of the world. They are an extraordinarily diverse group by the measures that their respective populations use to sort people into incompatible civilizational categories: Muslim and Christian, Iranian and American, Saudi and Israeli, Chinese and European. By those measures, they should find each other alien and threatening.

They do not. They find each other familiar.

They speak the same language — not just English, which most of them share, but the deeper language of capital: return on investment, risk management, regulatory arbitrage, geopolitical stability as a precondition for commerce. They share educational formation — a remarkable proportion of the world's ruling class has passed through a small number of institutions in Boston, London, Paris, and Geneva that teach the same frameworks for understanding economy, governance, and power. They dress similarly, eat in similar restaurants, send their children to similar schools, and maintain social networks that cut across the civilizational lines that their populations experience as impassable.

The Saudi prince and the American senator understand each other across the Islamic-Christian divide that their populations experience as fundamental. This is not hypocrisy, exactly. It is the natural consequence of operating above the level at which the belief systems they deploy for population management actually function. Those belief systems are designed to organize the populations at the bottom of each hierarchy. The people at the top of the hierarchy do not need to be organized by the belief system in the same way, because their interests are already legible to them through the universal language of institutional power and accumulated capital.

The Iranian industrialist whose factory produces goods that American consumers buy and the American manufacturer whose supply chains run through countries whose populations his government officially regards as adversaries do not experience their commercial relationship as a civilizational clash. They experience it as business. The frameworks that make their respective workforces see each other as threats do not apply to them because those frameworks were never designed for people in their position. They were designed for the people those industrialists and manufacturers employ — the workers who need to be kept from noticing the structural similarity of their situations.

This is not a secret meeting where elites conspire to divide the working class. It requires no conspiracy. It is the natural consequence of having interests that are legible at the level of capital and institutions, combined with having built belief systems that make the interests of the people below you legible only through the distorting lens of civilizational identity. The American CEO does not need to plot against the Iranian worker. He simply needs to operate his business within the American institutional framework, which does the work of preventing horizontal solidarity automatically, as a byproduct of doing everything else it does.

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## IV. What the Common Person Cannot See

The American factory worker whose job was moved to a lower-wage country is angry. This is rational. Something real was taken from him. The question is where his anger goes — who he identifies as the agent of what happened to him, and who he identifies as sharing his situation.

If the belief system he has absorbed is working as designed, his anger will go in directions that do not threaten the arrangement that produced his loss. He will be angry at the foreign workers who took his job — the Chinese, the Mexicans, the immigrants — rather than at the executives who made the decision to move it and profited from doing so. He will be angry at government for failing to protect him, without examining who funds the government and in whose interest it governs. He will identify with his nation — with America, with Americans broadly — in a way that aligns him with the American billionaire class rather than with the Mexican or Chinese worker who is also being exploited by the same capital flows, just from the other end.

This misdirection is not accidental, but it does not require active engineering in the moment. It is the accumulated product of a lifetime of institutional saturation. The schools that educated him taught American history as a story of freedom and progress, not as a story of labor exploitation and class conflict. The media he consumes frames economic competition as national competition — America versus China, American workers versus foreign workers — rather than as class competition, capital versus labor, operating simultaneously in both countries. The political system offers him candidates who speak his language of national identity and civilizational threat rather than the

language of shared class interest that might connect him to his parallel in Tehran or Shenzhen.

Meanwhile, the Iranian factory worker in a similar position — wages falling behind prices, job precarious, children's futures narrowing — has been given his own set of directions for his anger. America is the Great Satan. Western imperialism is the source of Iran's economic difficulties. The proper response to hardship is religious solidarity, national solidarity, resistance to the foreign threat. His anger, too, goes to places that do not threaten the arrangement that produced his situation.

Both workers are being managed. Both have been given a framework that makes the person on the other side of the divide look like a threat rather than a mirror. Both have been prevented from asking the question that would be most dangerous to their respective ruling arrangements: why is my situation so similar to the situation of the person I have been told is my enemy?

The answer to that question, if either of them arrived at it, would be destabilizing in the specific way that ruling elites most fear — not the destabilization of riots or elections, which can be managed, but the deeper destabilization of a population that has stopped believing the story it has been told about why the world is arranged the way it is. That story — that your hierarchy is legitimate, that your civilization is the normal one, that the person across the divide is alien and threatening — is the load-bearing wall of the entire structure. Remove it and the question of why things are distributed the way they are becomes answerable in terms that benefit very few people currently at the top.

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## V. The Good Woman and the Good Man

Return to the two women from the opening. The mechanism operating on them is the same mechanism operating on the factory workers, but it is worth examining separately because it adds a layer: within each civilization, belief systems do not just manage the relationship between classes. They manage the relationship between genders — and the management of gender is one of the most durable and pervasive mechanisms for enforcing vertical identification and preventing horizontal solidarity.

What constitutes a good woman in any given society is not a natural fact. It is a construction — built over centuries, transmitted through religious institutions, legal

structures, family expectations, and media representations, enforced through social pressure and sometimes law, and experienced by the women inside it as genuine personal virtue. The specific content varies enormously across civilizations and historical periods. The mechanism does not vary at all.

In the contemporary Islamic world, the good woman is modest, pious, family-centered, covered. In the contemporary American mainstream, the good woman is independent, professionally ambitious, physically maintained to specific standards, sexually available within certain contexts and not others. These are different performances. They are both performances, both defined primarily by men who controlled the relevant institutions, both transmitted through those institutions to women who had no meaningful input into the definition, and both experienced by the women who have absorbed them as expressions of who they genuinely are rather than as constraints on who they might be.

The same analysis applies to the good man. The Iranian man who understands himself as the head of his household, the religious and moral authority within his family, the defender of his community's honor, is performing a version of masculinity that was defined by the Islamic institutional infrastructure he was raised within. The American man who understands himself as a self-made individual, a competitor, a provider whose worth is measured in economic output, is performing a version of masculinity that was defined by the capitalist-Protestant institutional infrastructure he was raised within. Both are cages. Both feel, from the inside, like freedom — like the natural expression of what a man is.

The good citizen follows from the same logic. Every society has a version of it: the person who participates correctly in the institutions, who holds the right loyalties, who directs suspicion and hostility toward the correct outsiders, who identifies upward with the ruling class of their civilization and outward with the civilizational boundary rather than inward with the class boundary. Good American citizens and good Iranian citizens have almost nothing in common in terms of the specific content of their citizenship. They have everything in common in terms of what the construct of good citizenship accomplishes — the naturalization of a particular hierarchy, the marginalization of alternatives, and the prevention of the question that would be most damaging to those at the top: why is the arrangement the way it is, and in whose interest does it run?

> *The hijab and the beauty standard are not opposites. They are the same institution wearing different clothes — each one a mechanism for making*

> *women the enforcers of a standard they did not set, against other women who failed to meet it.*

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# VI. Why It Works So Well

The obvious question is why the people being managed do not see it. The mechanism described here is not subtle when you look at it directly. The structural parallel between the American worker and the Iranian worker, between the woman in the hijab and the woman in the beauty standard, is not difficult to articulate once the frame is available. So why is the frame so rarely available?

The first reason is that the belief system you absorb in childhood does not come with a label saying belief system. It comes labeled reality. The categories it gives you are not presented as one possible way of organizing experience — they are presented as the way experience is organized, the way things are. The American child who learns that individual freedom is the highest value and that her country is its greatest champion is not being taught an ideology. She is being taught the obvious truth about the world. The Iranian child who learns that community obligation and divine order are the foundations of the good life and that his country's resistance to Western imperialism is a sacred cause is not being taught an ideology either. He is also being taught the obvious truth about the world. Neither is in a position to see the other's truth as parallel to their own, because they were each given a framework in which only one truth is available.

The second reason is that the mechanism actively prevents the intellectual tools that would make recognition possible. Cross-civilizational solidarity requires the ability to translate across frameworks — to see that the Iranian worker's situation, described in terms that make sense within the Iranian framework, is structurally equivalent to the American worker's situation described in terms that make sense within the American framework. This kind of translation requires exposure to the other framework in sufficient depth to understand it from the inside rather than from the outside. That exposure is precisely what the management of belief prevents. The other civilization is presented through the distorting lens of threat and aberration, not through the empathetic lens of structural parallel. You learn enough about them to fear them. You do not learn enough to recognize yourself in them.

The third reason is material. Horizontal solidarity is not just intellectually difficult — it is materially costly. The American worker who publicly identifies with Iranian workers against the class interests of American capital will find his position within his own community uncomfortable and potentially dangerous. His patriotism will be questioned. His loyalty will be doubted. The social networks that sustain him — his community, his union, his political party — are all organized around the national-civilizational frame, not the class frame. Moving outside that frame means moving outside the material structures that protect him. Most people, most of the time, cannot afford to.

The fourth reason is perhaps the most important: the framework does not feel like a constraint. This is what the previous paper established and what bears repeating here. The American worker who identifies with his billionaire class is not suffering from false consciousness in any simple sense. He genuinely shares some interests with that class — he wants the economy to grow, he wants his employer to be profitable enough to keep paying him, he has pride in American economic power. Those shared interests are real. What the framework prevents him from seeing is the much larger and more consequential set of interests he shares with the Iranian worker, the Chinese worker, the Mexican worker — interests that, if organized around, would fundamentally alter the distribution of power and resources in a direction that would benefit him and harm the people currently at the top.

The framework does not hide this by lying to him. It hides it by making the alternative frame unthinkable — by saturating his environment so thoroughly with the national-civilizational frame that the class frame has no foothold, no vocabulary, no institutions through which it could be transmitted, and no community of people already living within it to make it feel like a real option rather than an abstract theory.

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## VII. Historical Moments When It Broke Down

The mechanism is powerful but not perfect. There have been historical moments when horizontal solidarity crossed civilizational lines — when workers in different countries recognized their structural parallel and organized around it rather than against each other. Examining these moments is instructive, both for what they show about the

mechanism's vulnerabilities and for what happened when those vulnerabilities were exploited.

The First International, founded in London in 1864, brought together workers from Britain, France, Germany, and eventually much of Europe in an attempt to organize around class interest rather than national interest. At its height it represented millions of workers across national lines and was taken seriously enough by European governments that they coordinated their suppression of it. It ultimately collapsed not because the idea was wrong but because the national-civilizational frameworks of each member country were more deeply institutionalized than the class framework the International was trying to build. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, French and German workers who had been pledging international solidarity found themselves on opposite sides of a shooting war, organized by the national-civilizational infrastructure that was far more powerful than anything the International had built.

The lesson the ruling classes drew from the International — and they drew it explicitly, in government reports and aristocratic correspondence of the period — was that cross-national class solidarity was a genuine threat that needed to be managed through the intensification of national and civilizational identity. The decades between 1870 and 1914 saw a massive investment across European states in exactly the institutional infrastructure that manufactures vertical identification and horizontal alienation: compulsory national schooling, state-sponsored nationalism, the elaboration of national symbols and rituals, the construction of national enemies. When the First World War began in 1914, French and German workers went to the trenches to kill each other with a willingness that would have been impossible without four decades of intensive institutional preparation. The International's project was not defeated by argument. It was defeated by institution-building.

A century later, the anti-globalization movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s produced another moment of potential cross-civilizational solidarity — activists from wealthy and poor countries recognizing shared interests against the specific form of capital accumulation represented by institutions like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. The movement was briefly visible enough to disrupt major summits and generate international news coverage. It was managed partly through direct suppression, but more effectively through the post-September 11 reorganization of political attention around the civilizational clash framework — the

War on Terror, which redirected the anger of populations in wealthy countries away from class grievance and toward civilizational threat, with an efficiency that no government planner could have achieved deliberately. The accident of the attack was real; the institutional response that channeled its aftermath toward civilizational rather than class framing was not accidental at all.

What these moments share is a common structure: cross-civilizational solidarity becomes briefly visible as a possibility, the ruling class recognizes it as a threat, and the response is the intensification of exactly the institutional mechanisms — nationalism, civilizational identity, the construction of external threat — that prevent it. The suppression is not always violent. Often it is institutional: a reorientation of media attention, a redefinition of the political agenda, a reinvestment in the symbols and narratives of national identity. The goal is the same as the Abbasid inquisition's goal, operating through less visible means: eliminate the alternative framework before it develops enough institutional infrastructure to compete with the dominant one.

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## VIII. The Elite Is Not a Conspiracy

A version of this argument is sometimes dismissed as conspiracy theory — as the claim that a small group of powerful people secretly coordinates to keep everyone else divided and confused. This is not the argument. The argument is more interesting and more disturbing than a conspiracy, because it does not require coordination or even awareness.

The Saudi prince who bonds with the American senator over shared investment interests is not plotting to prevent their respective populations from recognizing each other. He is pursuing his interests within the institutional frameworks available to him, which happen to give him more in common with other people at his level of wealth and power than with his own countrymen at the bottom of the Saudi hierarchy. The American media executive who frames economic competition as national competition rather than class competition is not consciously deploying a strategy to prevent worker solidarity. He is producing content within an institutional framework — corporate media, advertiser relationships, national audience assumptions — that systematically favors the national-civilizational frame and systematically disadvantages the class

frame, because the former sells advertising and the latter threatens the interests of the advertisers.

The schoolteacher who teaches American history as a story of freedom rather than a story of class conflict is not conspiring against her students. She is transmitting what she was taught, through the curriculum that the state funds and approves, within the institutional framework that defines what legitimate knowledge looks like. She is as much a product of the system as her students. Her transmission of vertical identification and horizontal alienation is genuine — she believes the story she tells. That is what makes it effective.

This is the point that both simplistic accounts of ideology — the conspiracy version, which requires bad actors who know what they are doing, and the naive version, which denies that any systematic distortion is operating — miss. The mechanism works not because powerful people are lying to powerless people but because the institutional infrastructure produces genuine belief at every level, including among the people who build and maintain the infrastructure. The senator genuinely believes in American exceptionalism. The media executive genuinely believes his coverage is balanced. The schoolteacher genuinely believes she is educating her students in the truth about their country. None of them is performing. All of them are products of the same saturation that has shaped the workers they are, collectively and without coordination, helping to manage.

What makes the arrangement stable is precisely that it does not require a conspiracy to sustain it. A conspiracy can be exposed. An arrangement that produces sincere belief at every level, from the billionaire to the factory worker, from the ayatollah to the farmer, from the senator to the soldier — that arrangement is self-sustaining. It requires no maintenance beyond the continued operation of the institutional infrastructure that was built by whichever military power last won the relevant war.

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## IX. What Recognition Would Require

If the two women from the opening of this paper were to recognize their structural parallel — to see that they are both performing femininity as defined by male

institutional power, transmitted through different but mechanically identical systems — what would that recognition require, and what would it cost them?

It would require, first, the intellectual tool of structural comparison: the ability to look past the specific content of each belief system and see the mechanism underneath. This is not a natural capacity. It is a learned one, and it is learned most easily by people who have been exposed, in sufficient depth, to more than one framework — who have lived inside two different institutional environments long enough to see each one from the outside. This is why immigrants, people who have crossed civilizational lines, people who have lived in multiple countries or multiple communities, are often the ones who can see the mechanism most clearly. They have experienced what it feels like to have two different sets of obvious truths offered to them by two different institutional environments, and the comparison makes the mechanism visible in a way that total immersion in a single framework cannot.

It would require, second, the willingness to tolerate the discomfort that recognition produces. To see that your deepest convictions were manufactured by an institutional apparatus in the service of interests that are not primarily yours is not a pleasant experience. It does not feel like liberation, at least not immediately. It feels like loss — the loss of certainty, the loss of the framework that made the world legible, the loss of the community of people for whom that framework is still the obvious truth and who will find your departure from it threatening. The people who most need the recognition are often the people least able to afford its costs.

It would require, third, alternative institutions — places, communities, frameworks, practices — where the cross-civilizational class solidarity that the dominant institutions prevent can be practiced and transmitted. The reason the First International failed was not primarily intellectual. Its analysis of the situation was broadly correct. It failed because it could not build institutional infrastructure powerful enough to compete with the national-civilizational infrastructure that states had spent decades reinforcing. Ideas without institutions evaporate. The recognition that the woman in Tehran and the woman in Dallas are in structurally parallel positions cannot sustain itself as an abstract insight. It requires communities, practices, and frameworks within which that recognition can be transmitted to the next generation before the dominant institutional apparatus transmits something else.

None of this is easy. If it were easy, it would have happened. The mechanism described in this paper has been operating for as long as there have been states and hierarchies, which is to say for most of recorded human history. It is stable not because the people it manages are stupid but because it is genuinely very good at what it does. It produces sincere belief. It makes its operation invisible from the inside. It makes the alternative frameworks unthinkable. It makes the costs of recognition high and the benefits diffuse and uncertain. It has been refined over millennia by the accumulated institutional intelligence of every ruling class that has ever needed to manage a population larger than it could coerce directly.

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## X. The View from the Bottom of Two Different Cages

The Iranian factory worker and the American factory worker will almost certainly never meet. If they did, they would have difficulty communicating — not just across the language barrier but across the much more formidable barrier of the different frameworks each has been given for understanding the world. Each would find the other strange. Each might find the other threatening. Each has been prepared, by the institutional saturation of a lifetime, to see the other as a representative of an opposing civilization rather than as a person in a structurally identical situation.

And yet the situation is identical. Both are paid less than the value they produce. Both work for people who make more in an hour than they make in a year. Both are told that this arrangement is natural, just, and the result of their own choices and capacities rather than the outcome of a system designed to produce exactly this distribution. Both are given a framework that directs their anger outward — toward the foreign threat, the cultural enemy, the civilizational other — rather than upward toward the people who actually determine their conditions of life. Both are managed, effectively and sincerely, by institutions that serve interests very different from their own.

The woman in the hijab and the woman in the beauty standard are in the same position. The good Muslim citizen and the good American citizen are in the same position. The devout Iranian who understands his society's hierarchy as divinely ordered and the patriotic American who understands his society's hierarchy as the just outcome of merit

and freedom are in the same position. They have all been given different answers to the same question — why is the world arranged this way, and is it legitimate? — and the answers they have been given all share one feature: they locate the legitimacy in something other than the interests of the people who benefit most from the arrangement.

Seeing this does not automatically change anything. Recognition is not revolution. The institutional infrastructure that produces the vertical identification and horizontal alienation described in this paper is not dismantled by the insight that it exists. It is dismantled, if it is dismantled, by the patient and difficult work of building alternative institutions capable of transmitting alternative frameworks to the next generation before the dominant infrastructure gets to them first. That work is slow, expensive, and historically rare in its success.

But it begins with a recognition that is available to anyone willing to look at the evidence with sufficient honesty. The woman in Tehran and the woman in Dallas are not representatives of incompatible civilizations. They are neighbors in adjacent cells. The bars run in different directions. The cage is the same.

## A Note on Sources and Intellectual Debts

The theoretical framework underlying this paper draws on several major intellectual traditions, each of which captures part of the mechanism described here.

Karl Marx's analysis of ideology — developed across the German Ideology (1846, with Engels), the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852), and Capital (1867) — remains the foundational account of how ruling class interests come to be represented as universal interests, and how economic arrangements come to be experienced as natural facts rather than historical constructions. Marx's concept of false consciousness, though he used the term rarely and his followers elaborated it in ways he might not have recognized, captures the vertical identification described here: why workers come to identify with the interests of the class that exploits them. The limitation of the strictly Marxist account is that it tends to treat ideology as a relatively thin layer of mystification over a material reality that is otherwise transparent. The argument here, drawing on

later scholarship, treats the manufacture of belief as a deeper and more thorough process.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, developed in the Prison Notebooks (written 1929–1935, published posthumously), provides the most sophisticated account of how ruling class worldviews become the common sense of entire societies — not through force alone, but through the willing participation of the people being governed, who have absorbed the dominant framework deeply enough to reproduce it and defend it as their own. Gramsci's insight that the most effective power operates through consent rather than coercion, and that consent is manufactured through institutional saturation of civil society, is foundational to the argument presented here.

On the specific question of gender as a mechanism of social control: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) established that femininity is a construction rather than a natural fact. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) documented the American version of the construction with uncomfortable specificity. More recently, Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth (1990) analyzed the specific mechanisms by which contemporary standards of female appearance function as social control. On the parallel Islamic construction: Fatima Mernissi's The Veil and the Male Elite (1991) is essential — written by a Moroccan feminist sociologist who analyzed Islamic gender norms using the same kind of structural critique that Western feminist scholarship applied to Western norms, and who insisted that the mechanisms were parallel even when the content differed.

On the failure of cross-national worker solidarity and the institutional response of nationalism: Eric Hobsbawm's The Age of Empire: 1875–1914 (1987) documents the intensification of nationalist institutional infrastructure in the decades before the First World War as a deliberate response to the threat of international class solidarity. Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities (1983) provides the theoretical account of how national identity is constructed through institutional means — print capitalism, schooling, the standardization of language — rather than reflecting any natural prior community. On the specific case of American working-class identification with ruling-class interests: Thomas Frank's What's the Matter with Kansas? (2004) documents the contemporary American version of the phenomenon with journalistic precision, though without the full historical and cross-civilizational frame applied here.

On the universality of elite recognition across civilizational lines: C. Wright Mills's The Power Elite (1956) remains the classic account of how American ruling-class interests are coordinated through overlapping institutional networks rather than conscious conspiracy. For the international version — how global elites recognize each other across national and civilizational boundaries — Samuel Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations (1996) is instructive precisely as a counter-example: it is the elite-produced framework that tells populations their conflicts are civilizational rather than class-based, and its reception and influence is itself evidence for the argument made here about how ruling classes frame inter-civilizational relations for their populations.

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